

First Unitarian Church  
1009 East Ogden Avenue  
Milwaukee  
Milwaukee County  
Wisconsin

HABS No. WIS-267

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PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH

HABS No. WIS-267

Location: 1009 East Ogden Avenue (southeast corner of East Ogden Avenue and North Astor Street), Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

Present Owner and Occupant: First Unitarian Society

Present Use: First Unitarian Church

Statement of Significance: The work of a distinguished local architectural firm, First Unitarian is a particularly attractive Neo-Gothic church that survives in an excellent state of preservation. It is, further, the oldest remaining church of the denomination in the city and has been designated a Milwaukee Landmark.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1891-92. By the first week of January 1891, the society had purchased the site for its new church. Bids were submitted late in June and contracts awarded shortly thereafter. The application for the building permit (No. 128) is dated July 15, 1891. May 15, 1892, saw the first services in the new edifice, which was dedicated four days later. Church and grounds had cost some \$50,000, according to a contemporary newspaper story.
2. Architects: G. B. Ferry and A. C. Clas, Milwaukee. Church records, including minutes of the Board of Trustees' meetings and the Historical Sketch published in 1892, indicated that George Bowman Ferry, who was a Unitarian, played the major role in the project.

The firm of Ferry and Clas was in practice between 1890 and 1912. During this period they contributed many fine residential, commercial, and public buildings to Milwaukee. Besides First Unitarian Church, these include the Steinmeyer Building (1893-1894), Northwestern National Insurance Company (1907), the Frederick Pabst mansion (1892), and the Public Library and Museum (1895-1897). George Bowman Ferry (1851-1918) was born in Springfield, Massachusetts and received his education in architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, graduating in 1872. He came to Milwaukee in

1881 and by 1890 was in partnership with Clas. Alfred C. Clas (1859-1936) was born in Sauk City, Wisconsin and received his architectural training through apprenticeships, both in Wisconsin and California (1879-1881). Upon his return to Milwaukee, he worked in the office of James Douglas and by 1890, he had entered into partnership with George B. Ferry. After their association ended in 1912, Clas worked with his son, Angelo, until 1920 and in other partnerships until his retirement in 1936. Clas died in 1942.

3. Original and subsequent owners: The church was built for and is today the property of the First Unitarian Society.
4. Builders and suppliers: John G. Jones was the mason-contractor, Henry Kimpel the carpenter-contractor. Frank Steven was responsible for the carved stone ornament on exterior and interior. The carpeting came from Gimbels, the pew cushions from J. V. Beyer of Milwaukee, whose firm also handled refinishing several unspecified pieces of furniture. Records identifying the companies supplying the handsome stained glass and the church furnishings have yet to be found, but as regards the latter, the Matthews Brothers firm of Milwaukee may well have been involved.
5. Original plans: None known
6. Alterations and additions: The Historical Sketch of 1892 includes detailed descriptions of the interiors--church proper, parlor, library, Sunday school room on the second floor, and basement--as well as photographs of several of these areas.
  - a. Beyond the original building permit and a permit issued in 1904 for the parsonage (sold in 1920 and subsequently razed), there are no records pre-dating the mid-1950s in the files of the General Office, Building Inspection. It is known, however, that the following work was done before 1955:
    - 1) 1895: The richly ornamented oak sedilia, designed by Ferry and Clas, executed by Frank Steven, and given to the church by Mrs. William H. (Caroline) Metcalf, was installed in the chancel. In a conversation in 1937 with Emmett L. Richardson, then president of the society, Steven stated that the oak had come from Matthews Brothers of Milwaukee.

- 2) 1897-98: New steam heating plant; repairs to basement
- 3) 1919: Roof repaired
- 4) 1925: Organ repaired
- 5) 1929: New roof and carpeting
- 6) 1937-38: Organ repaired; interior redecorated
- 7) Unspecified dates before 1939: Fireplace on north side of the chancel removed; chancel railing extended to north wall, and opening created in the center of this railing.
- 8) 1939-40: Originally, the chancel furnishings were arranged asymmetrically, with a fireplace on the north wall, pulpit and organ at the south side, and the railing separating chancel from nave extending two-thirds of the distance between south and north walls. As mentioned above, the sedilia was added to this setting in 1895, and at undetermined dates in this century the fireplace was removed and the chancel railing extended to the north wall. In 1939-40 the furnishings were rearranged and several new fittings added under the direction of Elliott B. Mason, Milwaukee architect. Organ pipes were installed north of the sedilia, balancing those on the south. These, along with the organ itself, were refurbished. The central opening in the chancel rail was enlarged, the sedilia raised, and steps leading up from nave to chancel and a new pulpit were installed. The gift of Mrs. Emmett L. Richardson and the bequest of Mrs. Charles Norris financed the project. During 1939-40, also, the church parlors were redecorated and unspecified repairs carried out.
- 9) 1940s: When the church opened, the nave lighting consisted of rows of bulbs set in the arches of the hammerbeam trusses, a scheme that had delighted nineteenth century journalists yet did not satisfy Unitarian Church members of the 1930s. In the next decade, the numerous bulbs were removed and the present suspended fixtures installed. In 1945-46 a concrete floor replaced the original wood flooring in the basement; the

basement and church proper were also redecorated (in the nave this involved refinishing portions of the woodwork, among other tasks); much of the wood trim on the exterior was repainted; and the heating system was repaired.

- 10) 1951-54: Protective glass was set in place outside many of the stained-glass windows; new pew cushions were acquired; the church school room on the second floor was redecorated.
- b. Building permits and other records document these alterations since 1954:
- 1) 1955-56: Permits Nos. 157459A and 172593 record construction of a new boiler room in the basement and installation of a new heating plant and heat distribution system. The work was done by A. G. Behling, engineer; Arthur C. Wolff, Inc., contractor; and Reinke Sheet Metal.
  - 2) 1957-59: Permits Nos. 56084, 206912A, 207154, 212177A and 84388 all relate to alterations designed by Milwaukee architects Willis and Lillian Leenhouts and carried out by contractors B. H. Barg Electric Co., Henry Torke & Son, The Wenninger Co., Inc., and Harvey Mehlos. The work involved modernization of existing basement rooms and creation of new basement-level spaces on the west, beneath the auditorium, in an area that had been left largely unfinished when the church was built. Windows lighting this new basement section were created in the north wall after construction of a recessed stone terrace to a new basement-level entry in the east wall of the northwest vestibule. Here, too, the stairway was altered and built into the space once occupied by a small first-story room in the northwest vestibule area. Originally connecting the first floor and balcony, this stairway now joins all three levels of the building and the new exit. The heating system was again remodelled. In these same years the exterior was tuck-pointed, the weathercock atop the steeple repaired, and the pew cushions reupholstered. Mr. and Mrs. Leenhouts' drawings for the project are preserved in their files.

- 3) 1961-62: Permits Nos. 109105 and 31904 record installation of electrical outlets and fixtures.
- 4) 1966-67: Permits Nos. 147450, 149119, 155135, and 155136 document the \$185,000 addition to the church built at this time as well as remodelling of the existing fabric. Once again, Mr. and Mrs. Leenhouts were the architects, and Henry Torke & Son was the major contractor. The new wing joins the southeast corner of the church and the east side of the church-owned commercial-apartment block on North Astor Street, which the society had purchased in the mid-1960s. The addition is an L-shaped, essentially two-level structure. It contains a large parlor, kitchenette, patio, and corridors on the main floor, and church school spaces, meeting rooms, and office below. When this wing was erected, the parlor occupying most of the east end of the original building was converted to serve as the church board room, choir practice room, robe storage, office, and library. In the office-library, acoustical ceiling tile was installed, the sliding door in the center of the south wall was closed and converted into bookshelving, a new doorway created in the south wall, and a partition set in place along the west side of the room to enclose office machines and storage spaces. The library, stairway, and kitchenette south of the former parlor became the pastor's study and a corridor connecting the original building and the addition. On the south wall of the church proper, near the east end, a doorway was created joining auditorium and new wing. Finally, the roof was repaired, fabric and grounds renewed, and another boiler was added to the basement heating plant. Again, the Leenhouts' records include their drawings for this work. Prints of ten sheets dated February 25, 1966, are on file at the church.
- 5) Unspecified recent dates: New ceramic tile flooring installed in the tower vestibule and vinyl tile in the tower staircase.

B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure:

1. The church at Astor and Ogden was the third built for the city's Unitarians, whose history began with the

formation of the "Unitarian Society of Milwaukee" in 1842. In the next year they erected their first church--a Greek Revival building designed by Massachusetts architect George Guyld--at the northwest corner of Spring (now Wisconsin Avenue) and Second streets. Unfortunately, the last years of the decade found them unable to meet mortgage payments, and under foreclosure their building was sold to St. James' Episcopal Church in 1850 (the subsequent history of this little frame building is discussed briefly in the data pages on St. James' Episcopal Church, HABS No. WIS-255). Although services were discontinued altogether for a few years in the early 1850s, Unitarianism in Milwaukee survived the crisis--as it was to survive other difficult days in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries--and reemerged in 1856 under the leadership of such influential local businessmen as William H. Metcalf, A. F. Clarke, E. P. Allis, and Charles F. Ilsley, assisted by Unitarian ministers from Boston and St. Louis. By 1857 the group had built and dedicated a second church, a wooden Gothic Revival building that stood on the east side of North Cass Street between State Street and Juneau Avenue. In 1859 the society was legally incorporated, and in 1861 constitution and by-laws were drawn up designating the group the "First Unitarian Society" and its edifice the "Church of the Redeemer". While the latter name was employed for only a few years, the church building itself, enlarged in 1858 and remodelled in the late 1860s, served the society through 1890. Twice during the period 1856-90, services were suspended because of financial problems and declining attendance: in the early 1870s (from May 1873, through spring of 1875 Olivet Congregational Church rented the building on Cass Street) and again, briefly, in 1885. By the late 1880s, however, the group was flourishing once more and by 1890 making plans to erect a third church. In December of that year they sold the old edifice to T. A. Chapman, whose residence stood on the adjacent lot and who had the building razed soon after he purchased it. Proceeds from the sale were applied to the cost of the property at Astor and Ogden and the new building. The society held services at the Athenaeum from 1891 until completion of the present church in May of the following year. Photographs of the two earlier churches are included in the Historical Sketch of 1892.

2. Throughout their history Milwaukee's Unitarians and their ministers have been active in what nineteenth century writers termed "unsectarian" causes. In 1879, for example, they founded the Wisconsin Humane Society, and

in later years their members were responsible for organizing the Protestant Orphan Asylum (predecessor of the Lakeside Children's Center), the Protestant Home for the Aged, and the Home for the Friendless (Friendship House). Their minister in 1861, N. A. Staples, had created something of a furor in the community with his sermon "The Irrepressible Conflict," a vigorous denunciation of slavery. W. F. Greenman, minister from 1907 to 1919, was largely responsible for the establishment of the Central Council of Social Agencies, forerunner of the Community Welfare Council. The society's members have included not only such well-known Milwaukee businessmen as those named above but also attorney E. L. Richardson, who served for a time as treasurer of the Meadville Theological School, the noted pediatrician Dr. Katherine Baird, and the famed journalist and historian John G. Gregory.

3. In 1967 the church was designated a Milwaukee Landmark by the Milwaukee Landmarks Commission.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: The most significant are those in the Historical Sketch of 1892: a. view of the nave toward the chancel (east end); b. view of the parlor toward the south; c. view of the second floor church school room toward the stage (south end). (See HABS photocopies of these three views.) In addition, a perspective sketch of the church seen from the northwest appeared in the Milwaukee Journal for May 20, 1892. Photographs of the exterior from the northwest, the interior toward the chancel, and the sedilia appeared in A Book of the Office Work of Geo. B. Ferry and Alfred C. Clas Architects printed in 1895. The Unitarian Register for November 1958, published a view of the basement before the remodelling project of 1957-59. The collections of the Milwaukee County Historical Society also include several early photos of exterior and interior.

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Prepared by Mary Ellen Wietczykowski  
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September 20, 1970

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This Milwaukee Landmark is a sedate, attractive, Neo-Gothic design, with some details drawn from English Perpendicular Gothic. Excepting the newly completed (and unobtrusive) addition at the southeast corner of the fabric and the basement entry and basement windows created in the late 1950s, the exterior has seen no important modifications since the church was built in 1891-92. The auditorium also survives relatively unchanged, with the only significant alterations having been the modification of the chancel in 1939-40 and the installation of new light fixtures a few years later. Distinctive features include the carved stone label stops on the exterior, the auditorium's warm-hued stained-glass windows, the ornamental sedilia, and a fine hammer-beam ceiling.

2. Condition of fabric: Excellent

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The church measures 119 feet long (east-west) and 61 feet 6 inches wide (north-south). The steeple is stated to be some 90 feet high, and the height of the nave ceiling at the ridge is said to be 65 feet.
2. Foundations: Cream-colored local limestone
3. Wall construction: Rock-faced, gray Bedford (Indiana) limestone was used for the west, north, and east walls, while the south wall consists chiefly of cream-colored

local limestone trimmed about the windows with gray Bedford stone. The walls are reinforced at all outside corners except those on the northeast and southeast by angle and pier buttresses, some of which define the bays of the nave, along north and south sides. North and west walls are adorned with numerous carved stone label stops located at the terminations of the hoodmolds. At least one of these is a portrait of a prominent member of the church at the time of construction: William H. Metcalf's likeness appears on the center label stop of the west facade. Others take the form of human heads (probably not portraits), grotesques, and clumps of foliage.

4. Framing: Masonry bearing wall construction; interior framing brick and timber.
5. Porches and stoops: Recessed porch on west facade
6. Chimneys: Three--above northwest vestibule, on the south side of chancel, and on the east side.
7. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: The pointed arch is everywhere present in doors and windows. On the west (main) facade the visitor gains access to a recessed porch through two identical archways. Entrance to the vestibules on the north and south ends of this porch is through arched, oak, double doors stained almost black, with wrought-iron fittings and studded with large-headed iron nails. A similar double door leads into the tower vestibule on the north side. A recently added door leading into the stair well in the northwest vestibule is located below grade, is oak, and contains a colored, opaque glass window. Fire escape doors are located on the east and south sides.
  - b. Windows: Most of the church windows are set within pointed arches trimmed with rock-faced Bedford limestone and capped by hoodmolds with decorative label stops. The larger windows have wooden, Perpendicular Gothic tracery. Two large arched windows flank the recessed porch on the west facade and light the vestibules on the northwest and southwest. Two more windows of equal size and type are located within the porch on the west wall of the auditorium. Above the porch is a larger arched window flanked by two small

lancets. A similar, though less colorful arched window, with a small lancet window above it, occurs in the northeast gable. Centered in the gable of the northwest vestibule are two lancet windows surmounted by a small quatrefoil window. The tower has two narrow windows with transoms on the second level and three lancet windows with a continuous sill on the third level. Grouped lancet windows light the north and south sides of the auditorium and the rooms on the east behind the chancel. Auditorium windows are beautifully executed abstract designs dominated by autumnal colors--olive, gold, yellow, brown--whereas in the north and east wall of the office and the east wall of the minister's study, windows are of gold and white glass. Basement windows, some of which are not original, are wooden, double-hung units with one-over-one lights.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape and covering: Above the main auditorium is a steeply pitched, gabled roof which intersects another gabled roof that covers the northwest vestibule and the eastern portion of the church. The tower is located on the north side. From it rises a broach spire culminating in a pinnacle topped by the weathercock that has become the symbol of Milwaukee Unitarianism. Both gabled roofs and spire are shingled (roof covering not original).
- b. Framing: A timber-hammerbeam roof resting on load-bearing masonry walls covers the auditorium. The intersecting gabled roofs are also timber-framed, as is the steeple.
- c. Cornice and eaves: Stone and wood, respectively.
- d. Dormers: There are three dormer windows on the north side, four on the east, five on the south, and four on the steeple, facing the compass points. Dormers on the north and south sides of the auditorium roof form clerestory windows. Those on the east elevation light the second story church school room. Steeple dormers and those of the north elevation have gables embellished with tracery. Steeple dormers are louvered.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Basement: The extensively remodeled basement contains kitchen, Sunday school rooms, other meeting rooms, lavatories, and heating plant.
- b. First floor: Basically rectangular, oriented east-west. The church (auditorium and balcony) seats some 450 people and is entered through vestibules in the northwest and southwest corners, the tower vestibule on the north, and a doorway off the new addition to the south. Nave, vestibules, and chancel occupy the west two-thirds of the first floor, while the east third contains the tower vestibule, church office and library (originally parlor), and the minister's study and a corridor (formerly kitchenette and library).
- c. Second floor: On the east, the second story contains a church school room and, at the far west end, the balcony (above the recessed entrance porch). At the south end of the church school room is a small stage.

2. Stairways: Stairways connecting all three levels of the church occur in the northwest and tower vestibules. The chancel is four risers above the auditorium floor, and the door on the south side of the auditorium, near the chancel, is three risers above the floor.

3. Flooring: The basement flooring is linoleum over concrete (not original); the vestibules are tiled (original in southwest and northwest vestibules only); the carpeted nave floor is maple, as is the office-library floor. The short flights of steps leading from nave floor to chancel and to the door on the south side of the auditorium are Mankato marble. Treads on the tower and northwest vestibule stairways are not original.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: In basement and auditorium, the finish is largely painted plaster. In the latter area the walls have been painted off-white, quite different from the original olive and red color scheme. The auditorium ceiling is framed by five hammerbeam arches resting on the exterior bearing walls and oak brackets that terminate in exquisitely carved stone corbels of naturalistic foliage, each unique. The delicacy of this stone carving is echoed in the intricately carved foliate

ornament of the sedilia, and, as noted, both corbels and sedilia were the work of a single craftsman, Frank Steven. Careful attention to detail is also evident in the hammer-beam ceiling itself which is adorned with perpendicular Gothic tracery. Similar patterns are to be seen in the sedilia, chancel railing, organ chamber framework, and balcony railing. Above the painted oak wainscoting, the walls of the church office-library and tower vestibule are painted plaster. The second floor church school room, above office and study, has painted plaster walls and a steeply pitched, timber-framed ceiling with arches perforated by tracery and foils.

5. Doorways and doors: Doors on the north and south sides of the chancel are oak, adorned with perpendicular Gothic motifs similar to those found throughout the building. Doors at the northwest and southwest vestibules are also oak, covered with a deep red, leather-like material, studded with large-headed iron nails, and having a quatrefoil at eye level. The oak door to the balcony is covered with dark red velvet and studded with nail heads. There is a round window at eye level in this door.
6. Trim: Oak (largely original)
7. Hardware: Brass (largely original)
8. Lighting: Electric (fixtures not original)
9. Heating: Steam (boilers not original)

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: Facing west, the church is bounded by North Astor Street on the west, by East Ogden Avenue on the north, an alley on the east, and the church-owned, commercial-apartment building on the south.
2. Enclosures: Basement windows and entry on the north side are enclosed by a fence and plantings.
3. Outbuildings: The new wing joins the original fabric and the church-owned block at 1332-1338 North Astor Street.
4. Walks: Walks lead from the East Ogden Avenue sidewalk to the basement entry on the north and along the south side of the church from North Astor Street to the addition.



5. Landscaping: Open space around the church is limited, making extensive landscaping impossible. There are, however, small gardens and greenery on the south, west, and north sides of the structure.

Prepared by John Thiel  
3044 West Villard Avenue  
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June 23, 1970

and

Mary Ellen Wietczykowski  
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Milwaukee, Wisconsin  
July 12, 1970

### PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were made during the 1970 Milwaukee Project under the sponsorship of the Milwaukee Landmarks Commission of the City of Milwaukee--Richard W. E. Perrin, Chairman--and were donated to the Historic American Buildings Survey. This project was the continuation of a program to record the historic architecture of Milwaukee begun in 1969, under the joint sponsorship of the Milwaukee Landmarks Commission and the Historic American Buildings Survey, Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation, National Park Service, Department of the Interior. The project team included architect John Thiel of Milwaukee; architectural historian Mary Ellen Wietczykowski--now Mary Ellen Young--(Milwaukee Landmarks Commission); and photographer Douglas Green. The data was prepared for transmittal to the Library of Congress by HABS editors Carolyn Heath, Mary Farrell, Candace Reed, and Philip Hamp.